

Local Arts Groups Consider Sandler One Of Their Own

by James Rhem

Account ledgers tell only part of the story of how the Civic Center is doing. Consider for a moment the things that aren't being said about it now that were said last year: People aren't talking about local users versus road shows so much anymore. Resident companies aren't talking in terms of "leases" and they aren't talking about themselves as "tenants," nor are they describing the city as a "landlord." The contracts haven't changed, but local performing groups aren't complaining about conditions and terms as they once did. The reason is Ralph Sandler.

In his over 10 years as director of the Union Theater, as past chairman of the powerful Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission, as a performer in numerous theatrical productions and a member of countless arts panels and committees, Sandler won the trust and respect of almost everyone in the local arts community, as well as the respect of community leaders in general.

Sandler is a soft-spoken, politic man who, even when he doesn't quite trust you, conveys the sense that he likes you anyway. He grew up in Manhattan, but Madisonians feel like Sandler is one of them. That's the way he feels, too, and that's probably the central reason the public image of the Civic Center has improved in the last year. Sandler hasn't just spent time here; he's

embraced the town and the region in a way his predecessor, Edgar Neiss, simply didn't.

The difference shows in everything Sandler says about his job. Ask him how the Civic Center is doing and the first thing out of his mouth won't be a reference to the White Horse Inn opening nearby. Of course, he sees the Civic Center's economic impact on the downtown, but he knows enough of Madison's history to understand the Civic Center's social and cultural importance.

So when you ask him how the place is doing, that's the context he looks at first: "I think what's developing is a multifaceted role in the community. Early discussions about what the Civic Center should be—discussions I participated in—included the notion that the building was built primarily for the use of local performing groups. There was quite a bit of argument about that, but it was an idea I supported and still support.

"The economic realities of keeping the doors open unfortunately make everyone compromise a bit from that original goal. The city will support the Civic Center up to a certain level, and the great majority of those dollars are used for that original purpose, namely to make it a place local groups can perform in, can exhibit in. The nature of the compromise is such that we also have to be very concerned with the commercial use of the building—to see that there's a lot of it.

"What I'm getting at," he continues, "is that the building, which was originally thought of as an arts facility, has necessarily expanded in scope to include a lot of not-



Ralph Sandler. Photo by Glenn Trudel

necessarily-arts functions, and is becoming—and this is one of the things I was concerned with when I took the job—a community center."

It pleased Sandler that Tony Earl returned to rent the Civic Center's Crossroads for his election-night party after having held his primary-night get-together there. Earl's decision said to Sandler that the Civic Center is becoming a focal point for important community activities and is not just a culture palace. When Sandler took the job, one alderman told him that the Civic Center was just a place where elderly women in mink coats went to see old movies. Says Sandler,

If Sandler needs challenge to be happy, running the Civic Center must be bliss.

"I thought, 'If that's true, that's terrible. I've got to do something about that.'"

When he speaks of the Civic Center's community outreach programs, it seems more than lip service. He takes special pride in the Civic Center's first artist-in-residence, trumpeter Stephen Burns, who will spend a total of four weeks performing and teaching in Madison. Sandler started a similar program at the Union in conjunction with the Madison Public Library, and that experience undoubtedly helped him in setting up this program. Together with the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission the Civic Center is also co-sponsoring a tour of area high schools by the Ben Sidran and Richard Davis jazz duo. When the Nikolais Dance Theatre came to perform this year, the Civic Center sponsored free master classes by the company both on State Street and on the UW campus. Though Sandler doesn't say it, all of these programs illustrate the ways in which his many connections to the community are building bridges of support for a facility that had at first seemed veiled in a mist of fine print and surrounded by a moat of arrogant disinterest.

"Things are a lot different now," says Sandler's assistant, Paul Beard. "If the art center asks us to turn down the heat we do it, or if they say they need a key to the

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elevator we give it to them. Everything isn't a bargaining chip." Tenants say Beard is right. "It's an easy situation," says Art Center Director Tom Garver. "Ralph has been very supportive."

For Sandler, negotiation involves finding a mutually agreeable solution, not a two-out-of-three-falls wrestling match. Earlier this year the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra wanted to break its lease. "We could have been really hard-nosed with them," says Sandler, "or we could have assessed the situation, as we did, and said, 'What is realistic? What is reasonable? We don't want to destroy this organization. We want them to continue, because they do provide necessary artistic services to the community. So how can we work this out?'" The orchestra

was subsequently let out of its lease and is no longer a resident company.

Sandler's ability to find solutions has a lot to do with his diplomat's temperament. But part of it also comes from having a certain affinity for Madison and the Midwest. Sandler, 43, first came here as a graduate student in English. Like his predecessor, he'd been an undergraduate at NYU, but unlike Neiss he found this region attractive. After a stint as an English professor at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, Sandler came back to Madison to take the job as Union Theater director. Madison is where he wanted to live.

While locals may now think of him as one of their own, Sandler is a cosmopolite. He was born in Stockholm in the dangerous year of 1939 to a German mother and a Swedish father who recognized that a Jewish family would not be safe even in Scan-

dinavia. When Sandler was 14 months old, with the Russians in Finland and the Nazis in Norway, the family fled south across Germany, then beginning its invasion of the Low Countries, to Italy and a port of emigration. It's tempting to see Sandler's attraction to tranquil Wisconsin against the background of this early disruption in his life. At any rate, as an only child with this dramatic past behind him, he was especially treasured by his parents. His mother, an intelligent and artistic woman, led him toward music and theater.

Sandler speaks German and Swedish fluently, as well as a smattering of French. "A few years ago we had supper with Eric Leinsdorf," says his wife Rebecca, a Wisconsin native and director of the Stagecoach Players children's theater, "and he and Ralph spoke German all night. That's the thing about Ralph—he can deal with

older people like that, Europeans, on their own level, and then come back and deal just as easily with young people. It's the way he was brought up."

Longtime friends say Sandler is a happier man since he took the Civic Center job. They say he even enjoys the politics of it. Says Sandler: "I'm certainly happy. I was getting a little bit tired. I had been at the Union Theater 11½ years, and I had kind of decided that there wasn't very much more that I could do there. I'm the kind of person that needs some challenges. I guess I'm happier because there are more challenges here."

If challenges are what Ralph Sandler needs to be happy, running the Civic Center would seem to offer a future of indefinite bliss. Whatever the future holds, for the time being most people are as happy to have him downtown as he is to be there.

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